

Howard residents hope CSX project won't derail school plans

Intermodal transfer facility would be near developer-donated site for new school

By Joe Burris, The Baltimore Sun

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State transportation officials met last week with a group of Howard County residents and school officials to discuss concerns that a possible container transfer facility might affect plans for a new school in the area.

The Maryland Department of Transportation is considering a dozen potential rail facility locations — including two in Howard County — for a CSX facility that would allow trucks to transfer cargo to and from rail cars 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The facility is slated to be moved from the port of Baltimore to free up space for international cargo.

The Howard Board of Education delayed voting recently on plans to build an elementary school on a 20-acre site donated by a developer near Coca Cola Drive, which is adjacent to the site where the transfer facility could be located. A site in Jessup is also being considered. Other sites being considered are in Anne Arundel and Prince George's counties.

During the school board meeting, the Greater ElkrIDGE Community Association conveyed concerns about the CSX facility, questioning its size and proximity to the new school, and the extent to which school traffic would be affected by the CSX facility.

Howard school officials are seeking to have a 600-seat elementary school opened in the northeast portion of the county by August 2013. The CSX issue is among many concerns that have marred plans for the school, which is slated to be built on 20 acres donated by a developer next to Coca Cola Drive.

Plans to build the school already have been beset with concerns that it was to be built too close to a MARC rail commuter line near ElkrIDGE.

The school board authorized staff to begin planning for a 600-student school without specifying a site, enabling plans for the school to get under way while the CSX issue is decided.

State transportation department spokesman Jack Cahalan said that the agency met with Howard County residents and school system officials in Annapolis on Wednesday and added it "pledged to provide more detailed information about the process and potential sites as our discussions with the Federal Railroad Administration and the [National Environmental Policy Act] analysis process progress."

Since the school board meeting, some Howard residents have complained that school board officials knew of CSX's plans as early as last fall.

However, Ken Roey, the school district's executive director of facilities planning and management, said the system was notified only of general statewide plans that it passed on to the school board in the fall.

Cahalan agreed, saying that state agency contacted the school system's planning staff about possibly locating the facility along the U.S. 1 corridor but he said the department did not provide specifics.

"The purpose of the contact was to provide a general 'heads up' that locating an intermodal container transfer facility somewhere along the Route 1 corridor was a possibility. It was a very general, preliminary discussion," said Cahalan.

"MDOT was not in a position last fall to provide any specifics regarding potential sites," Cahalan added. "That remains the case today as we are at the very beginning of a thorough alternatives analysis that will be conducted under the federal National Environmental Policy Act."

What most everyone concerned seems to agree upon is that an elementary school needs to be built in the area soon.

"We're in a tough spot," said Howard Johnson, president of the Greater Elkridge Community Association. "The elementary school that serves that area, Elkridge Elementary, will soon have 900 students in it." Elkridge's enrollment currently stands at 847 students, well above its rated capacity of 779.

"When my kids went to that school almost 10 years ago, there were only about 500 students in it," said Johnson. "We're in a position where we need a site for a school. We need a school sooner than later."